Tips for Coping With Lupus Joint Pain

by ANNA SCANLON

Managing Lupus and Joint Pain

Joint pain and arthritis are two of the most common symptoms of lupus SLE. For almost half of people with lupus, these were the very first symptoms they noticed, according to the Lupus Foundation of America (LFA). The LFA states that 90 percent of lupus patients will experience some form of joint pain.

Lupus most often occurs for women in their childbearing years. It is awful to be in your teens, 20s or 30s and feeling like your grandma with achy and swollen joints.

When I was first diagnosed, my untreated joint pain was so bad that I was able to sit with a friend of mine, a 70-something Holocaust survivor, and compare notes on musculoskeletal pain for hours. I was 24 at the time.

A good rheumatologist will examine all of your joints each time you come in for an appointment, bending them and checking for swelling and redness. He or she may also prescribe medication to reduce the discomfort.

Thankfully, arthritis relating to lupus is rarely progressive (so, it isn't your grandmother's arthritis!) and very rarely will lupus patients need any kind of joint replacements.

This may happen to a small minority, but the biggest obstacle for joint pain is trying to soldier through it and give yourself as much relief as possible from the nagging pain.

There are several strategies I use to help combat my arthritis, although on really really bad days, sometimes nothing seems to do it. But I find these solutions help make the bad days fewer and farther between. Though they still come, being able to cope with them makes them a bit less overwhelming.

Plenty of Sleep

The first key step to keeping my joints feeling their best is lots of sleep. I have no idea why this is the case, as I have never had a health provider tell me this would help and I have never read in any literature on lupus and sleep helping arthritis pains.

But for me, if I don't sleep enough, the pain can be very intense when I wake up in the mornings. As stiffness upon waking up is one of the major symptoms of arthritis within lupus, I think this may be related.

If I get enough sleep, my joints hardly bother me upon waking up. And if I wake up with severe joint pain and then go back to sleep for a couple of hours, this usually helps ease the pain.

While many of us with lupus either don't work or have flexible jobs because of our illnesses, there will still be times in our lives when we have to get up and function on little sleep. I spoke with my doctor about this and was given medication that made it a bit less painful to wake up on fewer hours of sleep — you may want to do the

same.

Otherwise, in order to keep healthy and pain-free joints, I recommend you get as much sleep as you feel your body needs. Obviously, don't lie in bed all day, but if you feel you need 10 or 11 hours per night in order to keep your body balanced, then aim for that amount.

Fish and Evening Primrose Oils

Another tip for keeping your joints happy and healthy is taking fish oil and evening primrose oil. You may feel like an old lady (or man!) buying them, but they are a great way to help you keep your joints supple.

Several doctors have recommended them to me, and I find they do help with joint stiffness and pain.

One doctor I had told me the fish oil might make your breath smell, so make sure you've got a good friend or family member nearby who can tell if your mouth smells unappealing. If that's the case, you can always reduce your intake and your fish breath will disappear.

Evening primrose oil is a great addition to your nightly rotation of medicine (which I assume you already take if you're reading this article) and is known to keep inflammation in check with its fatty acids. As a bonus, if you experience breast pain or eczema, it can help ease symptoms of those as well.

Next page: more tips for coping with lupus and joint pain.

Fish and Evening Primrose Oils

Fish oil's omega-3 fatty acids also help reduce inflammation in lupus patients (according to a study done in Northern Ireland in 2004) and can keep heart disease at bay. It is also known to benefit pregnant women and sufferers of certain skin diseases such as psoriasis. The beneficial omega-3 fatty acids can also be found in:

- Salmon
- Spanish mackerel
- Sardines
- Halibut
- Tuna
- Cod

However, it is recommended that fish not be consumed daily due to mercury and other toxins. Non-fish foods with these fatty acids include:

- Butter
- Flaxseeds
- Chia seeds
- Hemp seeds
- Eggs
- Soybeans
- Walnuts

Hot or Cold Packs

When my joints are feeling particularly achy, I often apply cold packs to my joints. Some people prefer heat on their joints, but for me, ice packs do the trick. This can mean a bag of frozen peas or an actual ice pack that I have purchased at the store.

I like to let them sit on the sore joints for about half an hour or so while I continue on with my work — my knees are

the most affected and as a writer, I can truck on with ice packs balanced on top of them.

I also find eating cold food helps me, though I'm not sure why. There is no scientific evidence for this, but when I'm feeling particularly sore, popsicles and ice cream are my food of choice.

However, be careful not to overindulge. Don't reach for an ice cream sundae every time your joints ache. Instead, opt for low-calorie popsicles or suck on some ice to ease your pain.

Exercise

Lastly, one great way to keep your joint pain at bay is exercise. But this tip gets tricky; I do not recommend exercise if your joints are actively hurting.

This can lead to further pain and possibly even injury. Instead, wait until your joints are either feeling perfectly normal or close to it, and start an exercise regime. You'll want to stick to it as often as you can (although exercising with lupus can be a bit difficult).

Talk to your doctor about exercises that work best for the type of pain that you have. For example, my knees are my most affected joints and therefore running is out of the question. But it is important to keep the muscles around your joints strong, so I do lots of walking as well as going on the elliptical machine.

Riding a bike is also a good way to keep my knees strong without going overboard. Again, listening to your body is key — overdoing it when your body is already in pain makes matters a whole lot worse, and it is best to rest when you're feeling that nagging inflammation.

Joint pain is one of the hallmark symptoms of lupus, and can be quite annoying and sometimes debilitating. However, it is very important to do everything in your power to keep it in check.